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SUBJECT: BULGARIA,S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: PARVANOV HAS
INSIDE TRACK, BUT NATIONALISTS MAY BE SKUNK AT THE PARTY

REF: (A) SOFIA 661 (B) SOFIA 786 (C) SOFIA 968 (D)
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Classified By: Ambassador John Beyrle, reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Incumbent Georgi Parvanov, a consistent supporter of moderate, pro-U.S. policies, looks poised to win re-election, if not on October 22 then in a second-round run off the following week. The conspicuous absence from the line-up of the charismatic Sofia Mayor Boiko Borissov has drained the contest of the high drama that would have resulted from a head-to-head race between Bulgaria,s two most popular officials. In the absence of strong alternative candidates, attention is focused on whether Parvanov can win an outright victory and on whom he may face if he goes to a run-off. Parvanov,s main rival is Constitutional Court justice Nedelcho Beronov, a political novice nominated by a center-right coalition of convenience, but a strong showing by extreme nationalist candidate Volen Siderov is also possible. Bulgaria,s record of political surprises notwithstanding, an upset loss by Parvanov seems unlikely. All signs suggest the former Socialist leader, who played a key role in engineering the current center-left coalition, is set to become Bulgaria's first president re-elected since the end of communism. END SUMMARY

12. (SBU) The Bulgarian president has mostly ceremonial duties and limited power. More is at stake in this election because of Parvanov's strong behind-the-scenes influence over the current government. The vote is largely seen as a referendum on the performance of the Socialist-led coalition, brokered by Parvanov in August 2005 following indecisive general elections. The three-party coalition, formed with EU accession as its top priority, also includes ex-King Simeon Saxe-Coburg's Movement for Simeon II (NMSS) and the predominantly ethnic Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), but is often referred as a &coalition of four8 because of Parvanov's hand. The President has installed key members from his staff in the political cabinet of his protg, PM Sergey Stanishev, including the foreign minister. The new president will lead Bulgaria into the European Union in January of 2007.

THE KEY CONTESTANTS

13. (U) Seven pairs of candidates for president and vice-president have registered for the vote, but opinion polls suggest the real battle will be among the following contestants:

14. (C) GEORGI PARVANOV, 49, won a surprise victory in the 2001 presidential election in a dramatic twist that is a vivid example of the unpredictability of Bulgarian politics. Elected BSP chairman in 1996, Parvanov played a key role in revamping the ex-communist party into a social democratic party endorsing Euro-Atlantic values. The soft-spoken

historian has come a long way himself, from leading anti-NATO protests in the mid-1990s to being a staunch advocate of Bulgaria's pro-Western policies. Since taking office as president in January 2002, he has won wide respect for his moderate, statesmanlike position on both domestic and foreign policy issues. Parvanov has consistently supported a centrist, pro-U.S. policy on the GWOT, Iraq and joint basing facilities. He has skillfully walked the tightrope between endorsing pro-U.S. policies and pleasing the leftist BSP core electorate on which he relies for re-election. Even Parvanov's political opponents admit that during his five years in office he has not made a major gaffe, although some add that he has not made any bold, memorable political statements either. His occasional criticism of the government and frequent comments on sensitive social issues has helped him garner broad popularity, with current approval ratings exceeding 60 percent. Even recent controversy about his alleged collaboration with the former communist State Security service (Ref. B) has not eroded his popularity.

¶5. (C) In order to expand his support beyond the BSP base, Parvanov is running as an independent, with his campaign expected to focus primarily on social issues. He has the backing of the governing Socialists and the ethnic Turkish MRF, the two parties with the most disciplined electorate. His running mate, current Vice-President Angel Marin, a conservative former general, appeals to the more hard-line BSP voters who view Parvanov as too moderate. Officials from Parvanov's camp deem his strong lead a double-edge sword, fearing that some supporters may stay home if his victory is seen as a foregone conclusion. That, coupled with the general discontent with the Bulgarian political class, may deny him a first-round win, according to our contacts in Parvanov's camp.

¶6. (SBU) NEDELCHO BERONOV, 78, the outgoing chair of Bulgaria's Constitutional Court, was nominated by the two main center-right groups)- the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) and the Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB)) and smaller right-wing parties. His joint nomination has failed to disguise the continuing ego clashes among the leaders of a center-right that has been in disarray since a bitter election defeat in 2001. A respected lawyer with over 40 years on the bench, Beronov's reputation is untainted by corruption. But he is a political novice little known to the public and his candidacy has so far failed to excite the disillusioned center-right voters, some of whom, according to a recent poll, are inclined to support Parvanov. Beronov is likely to attack Parvanov for his alleged ties with the communist security services and his failure to take a more decisive stand on the issues of crime and corruption.

¶7. (C) VOLEN SIDEROV, an ultra-nationalist known for his rabid anti-U.S. rhetoric, was nominated by his weakened Ataka party, which won a surprise nine percent of the vote in 2005 general elections. Once viewed as a progressive and talented journalist, Siderov, 50, has become the most extreme voice in Bulgarian politics since launching his nationalist Ataka party in May 2005. The party appeared on the verge of unraveling earlier this year as it was beset by high-profile scandals, key defections and severe infighting. Ataka's fiery leader was stripped of his parliamentary immunity and charged with perjury and obstruction of justice (Ref. A). Clearly, though, it is too early to write Siderov's political obituary. Polls show he may become the surprise vote-getter of this election due to Ataka's highly energized core electorate and growing public discontent with mainstream parties. Running on anti-government and anti-minority rhetoric, Siderov is expected to attack the incumbent President for his role in bringing the ethnic Turkish MRF party into the government, a theme that resonates with Bulgarian voters not so much because they are anti-Turkish, but because the MRF is notoriously and unabashedly corrupt. Siderov also reflects public opinion in his opposition to the presence of U.S. forces in Bulgaria and the deployment of Bulgarian forces abroad.

¶8. (U) Two other candidates with a track record are former

Constitutional Court judge GEORGI MARKOV, who is running on the ticket of the marginal Order, Law and Justice center-right party, and former armed forces Chief of Staff Gen. LYUBEN PETROV, a hardliner who recently launched a left-leaning nationalist party. Polls indicate that they have negligible chances to make it to a run-off.

THE NOTABLE ABSENTEES) THE GENERAL AND THE KING

¶9. (C) The real story in the run-up to the presidential vote has become, ironically, not who is running but who is not. The most significant absentee is the highly popular Sofia Mayor Boiko Borissov, who polls suggest could have a realistic chance to oust Parvanov (Ref. D). A months-long media frenzy centered on whether the charismatic General, who previously served as Interior Ministry Chief Secretary, would join the presidential race. The former bodyguard, who enjoys near-heroic status in Bulgaria for his tough guy image, plain language and clear messages, skillfully raised his already-high profile. His contradictory statements on whether he would or would not run made daily front-page headlines, exacerbating fears in Parvanov's camp. Beronov's staff, on the other hand, hoped to gain Borissov's endorsement. Talks between center-right leaders and Borissov collapsed partly due to an ego clash between the mayor and DSB leader Ivan Kostov, another strongman. Ultimately, Borissov announced he would not join the presidential contest or endorse any candidate. Instead, he set the formal debut of his GERB political party for December 3, further fueling speculation that he might be eyeing the more powerful PM post. Borissov told us that he wants to revitalize and unify the center right, hence his decision to launch a new party.

¶10. (C) Also missing from the line-up is ex-King Simeon II, who already in the 1940's served as Bulgaria's head of state as a child king but was deposed by the communists at the age of six. The former PM was widely considered a possible candidate for the presidency, which suits his royal personality much better than the PM post. But with his popularity sagging and his image severely tainted by a corruption probe linked to the ongoing Savoy affair (Ref. C), his chances of winning the election were close to zero. Other NMSS officials have insisted that the party should name a candidate to stay in the game and retain its political identity (Ref. D). Simeon has vehemently maintained they do not need to rock the coalition boat by naming a rival candidacy that could anger the Socialists. The party decided it would neither take part in the presidential race nor

endorse any candidate, a move which local press called &political suicide.⁸ If not suicide, it is deeply embarrassing and enervating to several top party leaders who have confided in us.

ELECTION RULES AND PROCEDURES

¶11. (U) The election is preceded by a month-long campaign, which kicked off September 19. Preliminary results are announced by the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) within several hours after the end of the voting. Final results are announced by the CEC within 72 hours of the 8 p.m. poll closing. Exit polls are allowed but results cannot be revealed before polling stations close. Voting age is 18. If no candidate wins more than 50 percent of the vote, or if turnout is below 50 percent of the registered voters, a run-off will be held between the two front-runners October 29. A simple majority, regardless of the turnout, determines the winner in the run-off. The new president and vice president will take the oath of office on January 19, 2007.

¶12. (C) COMMENT: All recent polls and analysts' projections point to President Parvanov becoming Bulgaria's first president to be re-elected since the fall of communism, although voter apathy may prevent him from pulling off an outright victory in the first round. Although his influence on Stanishev has been lately decreasing as the young PM seeks

to break free from his mentor's influence, Parvanov's showing will nevertheless reflect on the fortunes of the government. A surprise loss by Parvanov similar to that of his predecessor five years ago is unlikely, especially given that according to our contacts within the campaign, Parvanov is likely to stick to his usual moderate tone. The worst-case scenario for Bulgaria in this election seems the possibility for a strong protest vote propelling ultra nationalist Siderov to a run-off, similar to Le Pen's race against Chirac four years ago. If the traditional center-right fails to make it into the second round, Sofia Mayor Borissov will be well placed to step in and pick up the pieces. END COMMENT
BEYRLE